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WHY PRESIDENTS STUMBLE

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THE U.S.

has eyes and ears all over the globe. Yet our Presidents often act like someone who is blind and deaf. They seldom seem to anticipate world events of momentous importance. They have been caught napping by revolutions, invasions and other developments of awesome consequence.

Why is the President invariably so late to act that he can only react? I can tell you that it's not from lack of sound information. He is served by professionals who spend their lives sifting fact from fantasy, truth from propaganda. They produce stunningly accurate assessments—which are routinely ignored by the White House. Consider a few examples of warnings that have gone unheeded:

- President Richard Nixon could have prevented the ruinous 40-fold jump in oil prices had he heeded the available warnings. The federal government, with all the agencies that watch over the oil industry, had an immense early-alert system.

- President Jimmy Carter could have spared the nation 444 days of humiliation if he had just paid attention to the State Department's Iranian experts. With startling prescience, they warned of the likelihood of an attack on the embassy and the seizure of hostages.

- President Carter could have stopped Fidel Castro from shipping Cuba's criminals and crazies to Florida, where they have aggravated the crime rate. The CIA submitted at least five advance warnings of Castro's intentions.

- President Carter might have dissuaded the Soviets from invading Afghanistan, thus preventing the breakdown of détente, if he had acted on advance information. He seemed to be the only one in high places who was surprised by the invasion.

- President Ronald Reagan might have been able to avert the Falkland Islands mess had he reacted promptly to intelligence reports that the Argentines would invade. Indeed, the Argentine generals had the false impression that the invasion would have his blessing.

- President Reagan could have dealt more effectively with the Lebanon crisis if he had heeded intelligence assess-

ments that an Israeli invasion was "inevitable." Earlier, the Israeli attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor also was forecast precisely.

In each of these disasters, a President had access to information that would have enabled him to take preventive actions, rather than blunder along. Maybe the correct intelligence never reached the President. Maybe it had been so twisted or toned down that it was easy to ignore. Yet in some cases, I had published the warnings long before events got out of control.

Of course, a President gets bad advice as well as good. Conflicting information comes in from various confidential sources available to him. The real pros among those who provide information have been able to forecast or anticipate events with far more reliability than any President has ever done. The problem is that the politicians around the President either don't know who the reliable experts are or prefer to ignore them.

How does crucial information get cut off at the pass? First, let's examine how a President reaches his decisions.

Though different Presidents have asked for intelligence in different forms, each has received what is known in the intelligence community as the PDB, or President's Daily Brief. The idea is to give a President the most sensitive information U.S. intelligence agencies have gathered in a document he can read in 15 minutes.

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Beyond the PDB, each President since mid-1975 has received a lengthier summary of events in every important area of concern to U.S. foreign policy. Called the National Intelligence Daily, it goes to about 100 top policymakers in Washington. In urgent cases—a coup, say, or a military attack somewhere—special “alert memorandums” are sent up.

Then there are the National Intelligence Estimates and Special National Intelligence Estimates. The NIEs and SNIEs (known informally as “knees” and “sneeze”) are intended to predict the military, political or economic future of particular countries, along with various options the United States can take to affect the situation.

President Reagan likes his policy memos boiled down to a single page, complete with options. Perhaps once a month, he also reviews a more detailed foreign policy paper prepared by the National Security Council.

With this elaborate intelligence machinery, you might think no President could ever be caught by surprise. The trouble is, these top-level reports are the product of a committee mentality—a consensus with no rough edges to irritate a President or nag him with doubts. One insider described these assessments as “a kind of sanitized groupthink.”

Too often, the President’s top advisers see to it that he is told only what he wants to hear—information that makes his predetermined policies or campaign

promises look wise and wonderful. They tend, in the way of subordinates, to ape the President and to view all problems in the context of his basic beliefs.

This toadying attitude has a chilling effect on the professionals who are usually blocked from access to the President. They see their information discarded and their analyses ignored by political aides who know what the boss wants to hear. The most striking examples of this sycophantic system and its disastrous results were probably seen in Vietnam and Iran: The CIA loyally exaggerated the strength and popularity of the South Vietnamese government and the late Shah of Iran, knowing it would please the man in the White House.

“The NIE process discourages dissent, which is often relegated to footnote position, if mentioned at all,” noted a top-secret report that was intended to alert President Reagan to the danger. The stinging rebuke faults the system on two key points: lack of competition among intelligence analyses and failure to keep track of past performance to see who was right and who was wrong.

“These deficiencies exist notwithstanding general recognition by virtually all governments that competitive analysis is essential to accuracy and that quality review is the best method of weeding out those incapable or deliber-

ately prone toward drawing incorrect assessments,” the report declared.

President Reagan, thus put on notice, did nothing to change the system. The assessments that go to him, White House sources ad-

mit, are still tailored to fit his preconceived notions. Intelligence summaries and policy papers tend to be worded in language that will be compatible with his fundamental philosophy.

The public, of course, is kept in the dark. These documents are hidden under a protective cover so secure that even the classification labels stamped on them are secret. The public has no way of knowing what advice the President may have disregarded that could have prevented a foreign policy fiasco.

The secrecy that obscures the dedication of those who are consistently right also covers up, unfortunately, the dereliction of those who are consistently wrong. If the bad advice comes from the higher echelons, as it so often does, sometimes the security apparatus of an entire agency is used to cover up the embarrassment.

The report to President Reagan, in fact, warned scathingly, “At the CIA,

there appears to be today almost a direct relationship between degrees of failure to predict accurately . . . and career success.”

To write this article, of course, I had to penetrate the tightly guarded decision-making process. I am in touch with the professionals. I regularly read their secret assessments.

Let’s consider some of the more egregious blunders made by recent Presidents despite solid evidence that a calamity was in the offing. Each time, the warning flags were hoisted. Yet the skipper steered the ship of state right into the typhoon:

THE GREAT OIL GOUGE

So long as world oil affairs operated on any basis resembling the laws of supply and demand, there should not have been an oil crisis. The presence of gigantic surpluses and dirt-cheap production costs mocked the hope of desert dreamers that oil could be somehow captured and the world made to behave as though it had suddenly become scarce and costly. Nature and economics themselves would have to be overthrown.

Only politics could repeal reality. Here’s what happened next: President Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, wanted the Shah of Iran to protect the Persian Gulf, which is the industrial world’s main oil spigot. The shah insisted this would take a massive arms buildup, which the American taxpayers were in no mood to finance so soon after the Vietnam war.

The secret documentation does not identify whose idea it was to raise oil prices to pay for the arms. What is clear is that the shah suddenly began clamoring for higher oil prices, without the slightest objection from the White House.

The shah’s agitation—and Nixon’s acquiescence—led to the calamitous price increases of the early 1970s. The CIA,

secretly identified the shah as “a leading proponent of an OPEC price rise.” Saudi Arabia, whose cautious rulers feared a backlash against the oil cartel, offered to block the price rise. But the Saudis were unwilling to stand alone against the other oil-selling nations. As the CIA explained in a top-secret dispatch: “The Saudis are unlikely to risk political isolation and a breakup of OPEC.”

No one was more agitated over this than Nixon’s Treasury Secretary, William Simon, who was not privy to the secret arrangements with the shah. In a blistering memo to the White House, Simon charged that the shah not only was “the dominant force in OPEC for higher oil prices” but also was propounding “bogus economic arguments . . . [that] should not go unchallenged.”

The Saudi royal family had told him personally, Simon wrote, that “Saudi Arabia would press OPEC for lower prices” but that they “need the U.S. to help turn the shah around . . . They wonder whether, in fact, we want lower oil prices, since we never even raise the subject with the shah.”

Nixon had the means to prevent a switch of the world balance of oil power to the ambitious sheikdoms of the Middle East. He did nothing; then it was too late.

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THE SHAH'S DOWNFALL

The Shah of Iran was installed on his Peacock Throne through the good offices of the CIA and became the pampered darling of successive Presidents almost to the day he was overthrown.

He was so favored that the CIA became blind to the unrest that was seething under the surface in Iran. But urgent warnings came from other quarters. Perhaps the most blunt was delivered by Saudi Arabia's oil minister, Sheik Ahmed Zaki Yamani, in a conversation with U.S. Ambassador James Akins.

The ambassador reported to Washington on Aug. 27, 1975, that Yamani had told him "the shah was a megalomaniac, that he was highly unstable mentally and if we didn't recognize this, there must be something wrong with our powers of observation."

Then came the warning, "If the shah departs," wrote Akins, "we could have a violent, anti-American regime in Tehran." I reported excerpts from Akins' secret memo in 1976.

Yet as late as 1979, President Carter was still calling the shah's regime "an island of stability" in the turbulent Middle East.

THE HOSTAGE CRISIS

For months, the Carter White House ignored explicit warnings from the field that American Embassy personnel in Tehran would be in physical danger if

the deposed shah were admitted into the United States.

This should not have surprised the President. In February 1979, armed attackers stormed the embassy and held more than 100 persons hostage for nearly two hours. Yet this "dress rehearsal" for the later seizure was shrugged off. No stringent security precautions were undertaken.

Not everyone was asleep, of course. Repeated cables from Tehran warned that allowing the shah refuge in the United States could provoke an attack on the embassy.

On July 26, for example, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance asked L. Bruce Laingen, the chargé d'affaires in Tehran, for his "personal and private evaluation on the effect of such a move [granting the shah sanctuary] on the safety of Americans in Iran." Laingen promptly replied that the shah's admission would touch off retaliation and stressed that the embassy was poorly defended.

On Aug. 2, Henry Precht, head of the Iranian desk at the State Department, acknowledged that "the danger of hos-

tages being taken in Iran will persist." He added, "We should make no move toward admitting the shah until we have obtained and tested a new and substantially more effective guard force for the embassy."

Nevertheless, the shah was admitted. Yet the steps to beef up security were never taken, and the hostages were seized on Nov. 4.

THE AFGHANISTAN AFFAIR

In a rare episode of Presidential candor, Jimmy Carter admitted that he was caught completely by surprise when Soviet troops rolled across the border into Afghanistan in late December 1979. Leonid Brezhnev had lied to him!

Whatever this startling admission says about Carter's naiveté, it also provides a disturbing example of how the elaborate intelligence pipeline to the White House breaks down. For the fact of the matter is that the intelligence experts sent the President warnings of a possible Soviet invasion at least six months before it happened. The warnings included reports of an unusual influx of Soviet military advisers and—more ominous still—Red Army troop movements into districts near Afghanistan.

Unable to stir up any concern at the White House, the intelligence agencies went to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where they got better results. The committee was so alarmed by the intelligence information that it had a copy of its secret report, dated Sept. 21, hand-delivered to the White House.

The report cited "the somewhat increased readiness of one Soviet airborne division" near Afghanistan and said that, despite the presence of several thousand Soviet military advisers, the new

puppet regime of President Hafizullah Amin had only "a tenuous hold on power [that] continues to erode."

All this, the Senate report warned the President, raised the probability of "an unfolding covert plan to intervene massively to support Amin." It even mentioned the Vietnam-style "creeping military logic" pushing Moscow to act—hoping that a little more Soviet involvement would crush the Afghan rebels.

Despite this wealth of warnings, Carter chose to put his faith in Brezhnev instead of his own intelligence experts. The result is that the Soviets, however embattled by the Afghan guerrillas, now have bases less than 500 miles from the Strait of Hormuz, the jugular vein that carries Persian Gulf oil to the West.

THE FALKLANDS FIASCO

The bloody, unnecessary war in the Falkland Islands probably could have been avoided if President Reagan had paid attention to intelligence reports. More than two months before the Argentine invasion, the CIA had predicted that Argentina "will take over the islands by force this year" if the ongoing negotiations with Great Britain got nowhere. The CIA explained that "the Argentine government is again trying to use the issue of sovereignty over the British-held Falkland Islands to divert public attention from domestic strife."

That called it right on the money. The Argentine junta's decision to invade came in the midst of escalating labor unrest; the invasion came only days before a scheduled general strike.

Yet, once again, an American President was caught by surprise. By the time President Reagan called the Argentine president to talk him out of the invasion, it had already begun. What made things even worse was that the Argentines thought the United States would at least stay neutral in the conflict. They had leaked word of their aggressive plans to U.S. intelligence sources and assumed that, in the absence of any protest from the White House, Reagan had no objection to an invasion. The Argentines didn't realize that the President wasn't getting the intelligence reports.

If Reagan had let the Argentine junta know earlier that the United States would support Britain when the chips were down, the junta probably wouldn't have begun the war. The Argentines' belated discovery of the true U.S. position struck them—and the rest of Latin America—as a betrayal. It will take years to repair the damage.

ISRAELI MILITARY ATTACKS

After the Israeli attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor on June 7, 1981, *The Washington Post* reported: "U.S. offi-

cials have said repeatedly since the raid that they had no advance knowledge of Israel's plans."

Yet the Pentagon's own intelligence analysts had given warning of just such an attack months before it occurred. In fact, on Sept. 30, 1980, I quoted a top-secret Pentagon report warning that Iraq could become the first Arab nuclear power with "a potential for threatening Israel."

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The secret report concluded: "The problem for the United States is not the prospect of a nuclear conflict involving Israel and Iraq...but rather the prospect of a preemptive Israeli strike with conventional weapons against the [Iraqi] reactor." Here again, the intelligence experts called the shot accurately, yet eight months later the White House was caught by surprise.

Similar warnings were sounded by the CIA regarding the Israeli invasion of Lebanon—even farther in advance. On March 6, 1980—more than two years before the invasion—the CIA warned that Israel would strike across the border.

"The Israeli incursions, if not imminent, are nevertheless inevitable," the CIA warned. "The question is not so much whether or when such incursions will occur, but the scope and purpose of such incursions and their potential for igniting a wider and more dangerous confrontation. A large-scale incursion might seek to link Israeli-supplied Christian militia in the north, redrawing the map of Lebanon."

This was no lonely cry in the wilderness. The warning was repeated in other intelligence documents I have seen. For example, on Jan. 6, 1982, a secret analysis alerted the White House to "an Israeli military initiative designed to redraw the political map of Lebanon."

The document predicted with uncanny exactitude: "Israel's intentions must be nothing less than dealing a knockout blow against the Palestine Liberation Organization and removing Lebanon as a confrontational state or staging area. If so, the Israelis must sweep into the [United Nations] buffer zone beyond the Litani [River], eliminating the 15,000 PLO forces and linking the two armies under Lebanese Christian control."

In this instance, the warning never reached President Reagan. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger brushed it off, choosing to believe instead that "it is doubtful that a military operation will rectify the situation."

Speaking as Israel's defense minister, Ariel Sharon told me he tried to explain to Washington leaders 10 days before the June 6 invasion that the PLO problem had become intolerable. But, he said, Weinberger continued to urge restraint, ignoring the Israeli warning, which had been a clear signal that military action was imminent.

To sum up, the professionals are able to foresee events, but it is left to the politicians to respond. E